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CULTURAL RELATIVISM AND HUMAN RIGHTS IN AMA ATA AIDOO'S *CHANGES*: A LOVE STORY

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ABSTRACT

Ama Ata Aidoo's *Changes* documents the changing situations of contemporary women in Accra, Ghana. The novel deals with an idea of the Western-styled universalist language of women's rights, a concept that constructs certain understandings of women's rights as applicable to all women. The protagonist Esi's preference for polygamy as a potentially liberating system for a professional woman appears to challenge a universal thought of what women rights should be, especially with the understanding that polygamy is patriarchal. However, Esi's preference brings up the notion of cultural relativism and challenges the universal claims of human rights. Cultural realities – developed over ages in different societies – complicate any universal vision of human rights. Considering the conflicts between universalism and cultural relativism, this paper investigates how Aidoo uses Esi (after her choice of polygamy over monogamy) to confirm the fact that cultural realities relative to a Ghanaian society complicate any universalist approach to the rights of a woman. Hence, the novel can be interpreted as an effort to question the totalizing claims of women's rights that are based on Western notions of what women's and human rights should be.

Key words: Human Rights, Universalism, Cultural Relativism

Ama Ata Aidoo's *Changes* depicts the character of Esi as a divided personality. At the start of the novel, she is a strong character defying the traditional expectations of her society. She is educated, drives her own car, has a government job, and is against giving birth to more than one child. Her actions challenge the patriarchal expectations of her society. Due to her views on how a professional woman should live and her husband Oko's inability to cope with those views as he looks for traditional custom of obedience from Esi, their marriage collapses. But her later choice of polygamy complicates her ability to realize her desire to be free. Until her second marriage, her freedom as a modern African woman is remarkable although with fair amount of struggles. Although Esi "knows that living in a polygamous marriage will bring a series of complications" (Curry 188), she desires to be the second wife of Ali thinking polygamy as a compromise solution. In so doing, she accepts a patent traditional act although she blatantly opposes traditional customs. Nada Elia's remark in this regard is indicative of the complications of polygamy: "[Esi's decisions to enter] into a polygamous relationship...comes as a disturbing

surprise to her friends and family, as well as the reader" (143). Considering the dichotomies between universalism and cultural relativism, this essay examines the complications that arise from Esi's choice of polygamy over monogamy in her struggle to be free, an act that Simpson argues as "an unconventional one" (163) that complicates the voice of a woman from a human rights point of view.

The relation between culture and human rights is meaningful. According to Osaka, "culture is one significant factor that shapes human thinking and behavior to a great extent. Thus its influence on human beings affects their basic attribute: human rights" (2). But the human rights concept is widely contested due to the different perceptions of human rights between Western and non-Western societies, and within them as well. As a result, the universality of human rights is argued as well (Osaka 1). People have different views of "whether rights claims are based on status as an *individual* human being or status as a member of some *community or group* of persons" and of "the extent to which rights are viewed as *absolute or relative*" (emphases as found in Osaka 2).

Universalism and cultural relativism are two different understandings of human rights as Elisabeth Reichert suggests: “two of the most important concepts in terms of understanding the application of human rights to policies and practices will be universalism and cultural relativism” (23). And the conflict between these two ideologies is one of the most striking problems that characterize women’s rights discourse. Bhabhani Shankar Nayak maintains that “The challenge for women’s rights as human rights is the question of ‘how can human rights be authorized in radically different societies without succumbing either to homogenizing universalism or the paralysis of cultural relativism?’” (83) Universalism argues that cultures will ultimately change to accept the same system of law and rights as Western cultures have because “all human beings share the same inalienable rights” (Mayer, qtd. in Nayak 84). But cultural relativism rejects this view and debates that “values and norms are specific to cultures, thus, there cannot be one set of universal values and norms on which human rights are based” (Nayak 84).

While universalism considers an individual as the principal social constituent, who enjoys absolute rights in the pursuit of self-interest, cultural relativism accepts community as the core social module. Concepts of individualism, freedom of choice, and equality are secondary to cultural relativists as community is their first priority. Following cultural relativism many states look at universalism as impositions of western rights and values and as a form of cultural imperialism. Mayer argues that “human rights reflect Western values and norms, not those subscribed to by non-Western cultures” (qtd. in Nayak 84). However, cultural relativism is an inconsistent idea in itself. It is very often that one group denies rights of another group within a culture because of the clash of personal or group interests. Human rights, therefore, cannot be genuinely universal unless they are bound to cultural decisions that are often made in a culture. Jack Donnelly remarks: “A cultural relativist account of human rights...seems to be guilty of logical contradiction. If human rights are based in human nature...and if human nature is universal, then how can human rights be relative in any fundamental way?” (403). This questions the cultural relativists’ claim of human rights and their relativity to a culture. Thus both universalism and cultural relativism are

complicated issues in regard to their connections to human rights.

There are critics who ask for alternative frameworks beyond universalism and cultural relativism. Rao, for example argues: “One possible reconciliation between these tensions may be the acknowledgement that the dichotomy between universalism and relativism is an artificial construct” (qtd. in Nayak 87). Elstain proposes another solution to the issue “by stating that a global feminist consciousness can create feminisms which are unique to regions and develop from within women’s existing culture, thus making feminism appropriate to the particular needs of women in various regions and cultures” (qtd. in Nayak 87). Peach, a feminist theorist, generates a “feminist pragmatic theory” to mitigate the conflicts between universalism and cultural relativism, where she argues that “theory and practice are inseparable in the endeavor towards increasing and implementing women’s rights. The primary consideration...is which strategies of asserting women’s rights are most effective in a particular context” (qtd. in Nayak 87). Here, Peach may be looking for an equilibrium between universalism and cultural relativism. Echoing this strategy, Donnelly claims that “it may be necessary to allow limited cultural variations in the form and interpretation of particular human rights, but we must insist on their fundamental moral universality” (qtd. in Nayak 87). Donnelly further remarks that “radical or unrestricted relativism is as inappropriate as unrestricted universalism; some sort of intermediate position is required” (406). This alternative framework might be considered in reading Aidoo’s *Changes* as well, as Simpson argues that in *Changes* Aidoo “explore[s] the ever-contentious topic of polygamy, a traditional institution she neither defends nor rejects, but uses as a means to negotiate a new identity for her protagonist” (156). Susan Arndt resonates this alternative framework thus: “The African discourse on feminism is manifested in part in the theorisation of alternative concepts of feminism” (32). Arndt also states that “African-feminist literatures have proved flexible enough to take into account and provide a forum for differing perceptions and visions of a (new) coexistence of men and women...[which is an] African alternative to western concepts...[of] the monopoly of White feminisms” (43).

Esi Sekyi, the protagonist of Aidoo's *Changes*, is a modern woman with a master's in statistics and a well-paid government job in Accra. She looks to bridge her career with her duties as a wife and mother. However, she feels imprisoned by Oko's expectations of subordination and obedience to traditional customs. As a result, in her quest for independence she leaves Oko and moves into a polygamous marriage with Ali Kondey. It is ironic that although Ali is attracted to her because of her air of independence, Esi is not the one who is in control of this relationship. And ultimately, she is again a subordinate to a man, and in her search for independence, she ends the romantic relationship with Ali as well. This is a totally unpredictable situation as Simpson argues, "In *Changes*, Aidoo explores the challenge of 'having the best the environment has to offer' through characters like Esi, a woman who appears to have both a well-paying career and a family, but who is not sure what she expects of a life lived in a modern world grounded in a traditional society" (156). In this connection, Solomon Omatsola Azumurana says:

As an African woman, the cultural prescription and expectation is that she should be ready at all times and in whatever circumstances fulfill her husband's sexual pleasures and desires. But as a Western educated woman, Esi thinks otherwise. She believes, in opposition to her culture and in tandem with her Western education, that a woman also reserves the right to exercise a measure of authority over her body and decide when and how she can and should make love with her husband (7).

So, the contradiction or the gap between the modern (liberal) and the traditional (conservative) complicates the lives of the people in a society. And in case of Esi, the gap between the African cultural expectations and her thoughts of independence complicates her desire of becoming a free woman. She looks forward to solving the complication through a polygamous marriage—a compromise—between Ali and her.

Oko, Esi's husband, often fights with her on the issues of her work and her role as a wife and mother. Although he loves her very much, he cannot tolerate her air of independence in relation to him. He wants her to spend more time with him in the role of a wife that the traditional society expects from her. However, Esi dismisses Oko and

"admits that her monogamous marriage to Oko is stifling" (Curry 185). Empowered with financial independence, Esi may be trying to claim power over her own self that traditionally belongs to Oko, the male. And in the pursuit of authority, self-respect, and pride as a man Oko rapes her. In an African community like Accra, Esi's consideration of Oko's sexual violence as "marital rape" (11) instead of a husband's traditional right indicates disobedience although Accra as a big city is ahead of the country as a whole and that is why Esi behaves more as an Accran than as a Ghanaian in making her demands. In the post-rape scenario the narrative reveals: "What really finished her was her eyes catching sight of the cloth trailing behind Oko who looked like some arrogant king" (10). This "scene evokes antithetical images of subject and object, exaltation and humility, power and powerlessness, and Esi knows on which side of the gender divide she falls. But she also knows that the divide is a social construction designed to limit, even deny, her humanity" (Allan 180).

Esi's decision to be a second wife to Ali, who "has had a traditional upbringing [and who] seems to exemplify the figure of a modern, Western-educated African...a complex, hybrid character" (Simpson 164), and to live a life as assumed by her is never going to be easy because Ali is also a traditional African man with all his education and profession. As a modern woman, Esi is having difficulty seeing herself as an "occupied territory" (91) of Ali. But Ali counters thus: "What difference should that make? And what is this about 'only a second wife'? Isn't a wife a wife?" (89). In fact, Esi is in a world of duality with opposing pulls of tradition and modernity as Simpson claims:

Aidoo circumvents generic constraints in her depiction of the search for what constitutes a modern African female identity. The difficulties attendant on this search are dramatised in Aidoo's portrayal of the character of Esi, a woman who seems to have the opportunity to live her life as she wishes but who must do so within a society still subject to a stereotypical conception of African women and their designated place in the world, a place most often associated with the roles of wife, mother and helping hand or, in more modern terms, the realms of power, financial or academic success. (162)

Ali supports polygamy as a cultural identity while answering Esi's query about polygamy and its meaning in the modern African context. He is not at all content with Esi's equation of bigamy with polygamy and contends thus:

When put like that, yes, we are committing a crime. Polygamy, bigamy. To the people who created the concepts, these are all crimes. Like homicide, rape and arson. Why have we got so used to describing our cultural dynamics with the condemnatory tone of our masters' voices? We have got marriage in Africa, Esi. In Muslim Africa. In non-Muslim Africa. And in our marriages a man has a choice – to have one or more wives. (90)

Here, Ali is explaining his marriage to Esi from an African cultural point of view. Esi is frustrated finding Ali's thought grounded on a strong African social perspective as he forces her to wear the ring. Just after that moment, Esi starts falling short of her expression with gaps in her speech: "Oh...Ali...Oh...Ali...Ali. Esi tries several times to explain what she found so highly amusing. She failed each time" (91). These "blank spaces appear in place of her 'voice'...indicate Esi's lack of an independent identity, [and] her loss of a 'voice' as well" (Simpson 168). In this connection, Tuzyline Jita Allan writes: "As Esi gets entangled in love, her sturdy independence begins to turn flabby, leaving her enervated almost to the point of a nervous breakdown" (183).

In their effort to get married, Esi and Ali "agreed that since custom did not permit them to drive down in the same vehicle, they would have to travel separately" (91) to Esi's relatives. It's ironic that they are going to be in a non-traditional relationship, but cautious of a tradition to materialize that. Indeed, Aidoo creates a complex web of actions –traditional and non-traditional – which complicate the question of women's rights in *Changes*. In this context, Simpson argues that "[i]n failing to adhere to the conventions of a polygamous marriage, they [Esi and Ali] legalise their union and thereby ironically confirm the Western perception of polygamy that Ali has just dismissed. In this way, the characters must live in a modern world that is often complicated by traditional views and social structures that they do not really understand" (163). Simpson further notes that Esi "refuses to consider the implications of

having entered into a polygamous marriage, a traditional structure difficult to maintain in a modern world. In her desire to identify herself in relation to Ali on her own terms she chooses to ignore the key fact that polygamy is a *social* institution and will therefore have far-reaching social and personal effects" (164). Esi is not conscious that although "in urban Ghana domestic changes have...taken place...African women still have to cope with deeply ingrained cultural belief. These are the reminders that they cannot cut their umbilical cord with their traditional communities" (Curry 181). Esi does not recognize African feminism that underscores polygamy as a feminist approach that asks for women's emancipation as Carole Boyce Davies explains: "[African feminism] sees utility in the positive aspects of extended family and polygamy with respect to childcare and the sharing of the household responsibilities, traditions which are compatible with modern working women's lives...but which were distorted by colonialism and continue to be distorted in the urban environment" (9).

Aidoo further complicates the issues of human rights by raising questions from African women's perspectives about Esi's decision to be the second wife of Ali. Opokuya questions Esi: "Can you see yourself and Ali's wife getting together?...Being friends?" (97). While Esi answers in the negative, Opokuya clarifies: "In the village, or rather in a traditional situation, it was not possible for a man to consider taking a second wife without the first wife's consent" (97). Here, from an African perspective, Esi is destroying the terrain of the rights of another woman—Fusena. It seems that Esi is unaware of the African culture, tradition, and ritual of a second marriage as she "conceive[s] of [the] marriage in very individualistic" manner (Nfah-Abbenyi 295). Opokuya informs Esi of the pre-requisites of happiness in a polygamous marriage: "In a polygamous situation, or rather in the traditional environment in which polygamous marriages flourished, happiness, like most of the good things of this life, was not a two-person enterprise. It was the business of all parties concerned" (98). Simpson observes a similar point in *Changes* and affirms that "Aidoo clearly points out that marriage can only be successful if it suits the individuals concerned, and if it is conducted in such a way that social institutions will support it" (157). And being unaware of the cultural realities Esi is complicating her life and Fusena's as well.

Esi's marriage is a failure because she romanticizes "love" as "life" by ignoring the "cultural reality" of love which "is not safe...[and] dangerous" (Curry 183). Obiechina argues further "that the concept [of love] is alien to African traditions and therefore creates tensions because of conflicts with traditional expectations and customs" (Curry 183), which Esi overlooks and ultimately complicates her life. Esi does not realize sex from an African perspective as Buchi Emecheta remarks, "'Sex is part of [African women's] life. It is not THE life,' should serve as an eye-opener not only to Western feminists but as words of caution to Western-educated African feminists like Esi" (qtd. in Nfah-Abbenyi 295). She "needs to ascribe her sexuality within the larger context of historical and cultural Ghanaian practices that obviously do govern even a modern 'alternative lifestyle.'" She must learn to see her body as a contested terrain where sexuality and cultural politics converge and find expression in dialectical relation" (Nfah-Abbenyi 295). In fact, Esi must (un)learn the African social complications of human, women rights, of traditions social institutions, of (polygamous) marriage, of the metaphoric definitions of sex in Africa to sort out her complications. She needs to (un)learn that her body is a body embodied in Africa and in African culture.

The African cultural realities complicate the rights of Esi as a wife, and as a woman in her relationship with Ali. In the novel, "Esi negotiates the cultural constraints imposed by her polygamous second marriage to Ali, a wealthy Muslim man, and tries to face...[the] new challenge" (Curry 187), the challenge to face the terrain of Islam and Islamic culture in Africa. As Esi and Ali are from different religions, there always remains a gap between them, and Ali feels guilty about that: "Hopelessly guilty because he knew that there was not the slightest possibility of him ever being able to establish any rituals in the relationship with Esi" (119). And to Esi, as Curry observes, "at the core of Esi's dilemma is that Ali, unlike Oko, is from a Muslim culture" (187). However, Esi seems willing to try to establish some new rituals but Ali seems so defeatist from before that even he starts complicating Esi's situation further. According to the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* "[a]ll human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights" (Article 1) and "[e]veryone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or

other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status" (Article 2, *UDHR*) which is in direct contrast to what is seen in *Changes*. As Curry puts it, "[i]n the novel the Christian and Muslim communities are actually presented as existing in two separate spatial spheres in the city; they do not share the same cultural and ethnic standards" (187). Vincent Odamtten argues further that "the gap between the two communities is not only religious and cultural but also political and economic" (qtd. in Curry 188). This point, in fact, further complicates the issue of rights and in such a case an alternative renegotiation seems necessary to mitigate the gap between universalism and cultural relativism in finding a suitable position for a woman like Esi.

As an independent woman, Esi's relationship with Ali seems critical in respect of her rights as a woman. With Oko the relationship is husband and wife but with Ali it's "man and wife" (115) and she is now dependent (although emotionally and not financially) on Ali, which she is ashamed of - "[I]t was a shame for her dependence on a man" (120). The relationship is going nowhere because they are neither like husband-wife nor like friends. Esi's thoughts for an individual woman, free of social barricades, seem far away. The rights she searches for with Ali, after failing with Oko, are undiscovered. The only thing she develops is loneliness: "she soon realizes that she is trapped in a relationship that only brings her loneliness and disillusion" (Curry 188).

Esi's situation gets more complicated and tragic while she feels "restless and lonely...[and] could not plan anything" (141). She is now free without a family, or an African traditional home. She still has the opportunity to claim her rights as a woman, as a human being but it is complicated because there is no one with her to whom she can claim her rights. She is alienated from others because they will never understand why she feels as she does. Her anxiety of situation is expressed thus: "[I]n what way was her situation different from what it would have been if she had simply stayed as Ali's mistress" (149). According to Bryce this complicated condition of Esi "is not simply a personal dilemma for Esi, but a condition of contemporary life in Ghana where traditional rules have been superseded, but not replaced" (qtd. in Curry 188). Ali tries to keep aside the queries regarding his absences by presenting Esi with multiple gifts upon which Maria Olausen

comments thus: “[s]ocial and financial ‘reward’ thus instrumentalizes the relationship and ultimately frustrates Esi’s wishes and intention—a sexual life free from the idea of female sexuality as commodity” (68).

Esi misjudges polygamy and its cultural context and in doing so victimizes other women, at least Fusena, and contributes to her own melancholy. However, as a “reformist” (Arndt 33) African writer in *Changes*, “Aidoo seeks to renegotiate the identity of African women, particularly the way in which it is represented in literature, and to re-examine the issues such women face, including female independence and the nature and form of an equal relationship between a man and a woman” (Simpson 168). By so doing, *Changes* complicates feminism and women’s rights but provides potentials for investigating women’s issues on a wider canvas, issues that are also pertinent in most other societies in Africa and elsewhere.

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